

<http://www.radarassociation.org/Radar/RADAR/pos1.htm>

Are Radar Detectors "Burglars's Tools"?



Some Opponents of radar detectors have declared: "We don't allow people to own burglar's tools, and we shouldn't allow them to use radar detectors, either. The only purpose of detectors is to break the law."

That statement is unfair and just plain wrong. It's about like saying, "The only purpose of police radar is to raise money through traffic fines."

In the first place, most speeding violations are infractions, not felonies, so the comparison is deliberately inflammatory. It ignores the fact that many speed limits are set arbitrarily by non-professionals (sometimes in an obvious attempt to entrap unwary motorists), and that generally- law - abiding drivers have every right to be forewarned to such activities. Furthermore, it implies that radar speed measurements are always accurate which they aren't and that wanting to know when you're under surveillance is tantamount to the intention to commit a crime. Perhaps most important, it ignores the evidence that radar detectors do not hurt highway safety, and may well promote safety under many circumstances.

In fact, traffic radar itself doesn't have a lot to do with safety. Studies by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and several major research institutions, indicate that radar alone has little or no effect on speed behavior or accidents. Radar's usefulness is in making arrests easier and quicker. An officer can write more tickets in a given time with it than without it.

Interestingly, there isn't much connection between tickets and traffic speeds, either. In a study by the Transportation Research Board of the National Academy of Science, it was found that many of the states with the highest penalties for speeding also had the highest average speeds. One of the states with low penalties had lower speeds than 14 states with the highest penalties! The TRB also discovered a peculiar relationship between traffic tickets and speed. "Instead of demonstrating that the states that issue fewer citations have more speeding, the correlation indicates that the states that issue citations most frequently also have the most speeding" the TRB concluded.

None of this proves that enforcement is not important. Obviously, it is. What it helps to illustrate and what the research proves is that the principal benefit of enforcement lies in its visibility to the public. It is the *visible* patrol car that does most to suppress hostile and aggressive driving, and to assure the orderly flow of traffic. Not just writing tickets.

It all comes down to a question of whether the purpose of enforcement is to lie in hiding and by remaining out of sight, to encourage higher speeds or to deter unsafe behavior. If safety *alone* is the goal, than radar detectors are a benefit to and in partnership with enforcement by making police more visible on the road.

A number of law enforcement and highway officials agree with this conclusion. For example, Solicitor General Ian Reid of Alberta Canada and Major Harry Crytzer of the Pennsylvania state Police Bureau of Patrol have commented that radar detectors make drivers more aware of police and therefore they are more likely to drive safely and abide by speed limits. In Kentucky, highway officials are successfully using unmanned radar, picked up by radar detectors to slow down traffic along a dangerous stretch of highway. As motorists with detectors pick up radar signals and slow down, so does the traffic around them. Without radar detectors, this innovative safety measure would be impossible.

Detector owners also are safe drivers. A survey by the nationally known research firm of Yankelovich Clancy Shulman showed that detector users had 23 percent fewer accidents per mile than non-owners, and drove almost 60,000 miles farther between accidents. (They also wear their safety belts more often.) The survey concluded that radar detector owners are at least as safe drivers as non-owners.

We're happy to report that legislators in most states agree. More than 110 attempts to ban radar detectors in 33 states have been defeated in recent years. Only Virginia and the District of Columbia continue to deny citizens the right to be aware of their own police enforcement activities. We think that this record speaks for itself.

Radar and Safety

It's commonly presumed that police radar is a valuable instrument of traffic enforcement, and that without it highway safety would suffer. This isn't necessarily the case. In California, where radar is not used to patrol freeways or interstate highways, the fatality rate is the same as, or slightly lower than the national average.

Several attempts have been made to measure the effects of radar on traffic speeds and accidents. So far, no direct relationship has been found. When the University of North Carolina's Highway Safety Research Center (HSRC) investigated "Radar As A Speed Deterrent," they compared the effects of a visible patrol car, radar, and media publicity in 43 communities of various size. The investigators found *no evidence that radar alone reduced either average traffic speeds or the incidence of "reckless" speeding.*

When the police in Palo Alto, California conducted a radar "blitz" in 1979, issuing more than 1000 tickets per month in just one area of the city, the average speed of traffic decreased by *less than 2 mph!*

In 1980, when Maryland raised the level of radar enforcement, traffic speeds remained the same but the number of accidents and fatalities actually increased.

Radar Speed Traps

When used effectively, radar can help promote effective traffic enforcement. A visible radar patrol can act as a deterrent to hostile and aggressive drivers. In circumstances where pacing is difficult or dangerous, properly operated radar can assist in speed readings.

Unfortunately, radar is almost never used this way. Far more often, it is used where driving conditions are *safest* and where speed limits are *unreasonably low*. In extreme circumstances, posted limits may be manipulated to make almost every car a candidate for a ticket a practice popularly known as speed-trapping.

Radar accomplished only one thing; it makes writing ticket easier and faster. Instead of having to visually spot an offender, maneuver into position, and follow or "pace" him to get an accurate speed estimate, radar allows an officer to obtain a virtually instantaneous reading from a stationary or moving patrol car, while the target either approaches or recedes. Readings acquired in this manner will be accepted in most courts as near-infallible evidence of speeding.

The fact of the matter is, such a reading may have been improperly determined by an insufficiently trained officer, or with an instrument that doesn't meet federally recommended performance standards. At present, *no actual training or performance standards exist* for police radar, except in Florida, Michigan and North Carolina. When the National Bureau of Standards and the International Association of Chiefs of Police tested all major models of police radar, not a single unit met minimum requirements until modifications were made by the manufacturer. Some experts estimate that as a result of poor training, inadequate equipment, electronic interference, and other problems, as many as one in five radar-backed traffic tickets is invalid.

Some small communities, particularly in rural south, raise large sums of money by this purpose. Many larger communities, not generally thought of as speed traps, also rely on traffic fines for income; specific sums may be budgeted in advance, and allocated for a variety of non-traffic purposes. Jurisdictions that use enforcement this way may object to radar detectors for interfering with their fundraising; they can hardly do so on the basis of their dedication to safety. In such situations, motorists have used radar detectors to defend themselves against improper radar-backed speeding tickets.

Who wants to Ban Detectors?

Opposition to radar detectors comes from three primary sources. Many (though not all) police officers oppose them, both because of the perceived "challenge" to the officer's authority, and because they force him to work harder. A patrolman who's learned he can meet his department's ticket quota or performance standard in an hour to two by working a familiar "cherry patch," isn't pleased when detector equipped motorists escape him, no matter how innocuous their behavior or how erroneous his radar-backed tickets may be.

A powerful opponent of radar detectors is the insurance industry. In recent months, insurance representatives have begun speaking out in favor of bans, and the industry-supported Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) has performed a "study" purporting to show that detectors encourage speeding. While the study shows nothing of the kind (if anything, it proves the opposite), it has been misrepresented to the media and widely reported as justification for a detector ban.

Since insurance companies are permitted to charge higher premiums to motorists who get tickets, the companies have a financial stake in seeing the maximum number issued; because detectors may prevent or help motorists defend against tickets, especially for minor infractions, the IIHS and the insurance industry have declared war on the public's right to own them.

There is a third category of detector foes: public officials who are not aware of the technical aspects of highway safety but who have been recruited by the first two groups. These people are under pressure to do something about highway safety. "Don't blame us for accidents," they say, "Blame radar detectors."

Traffic experts and others who are aware of the facts know better. They know that radar alone has no influence on traffic speeds or accidents. They know that most motorists drive at a speed they consider safe and reasonable, regardless of posted limits, the amount of enforcement, or the availability of radar detectors. They know that anti-detector rhetoric does nothing more than divert attention from the need to implement truly effective methods to promote safety methods like campaigns against drunk driving, effective driver education programs, and truck safety inspections. These are methods that require work, not rhetoric.

Concerned citizens at every level who are genuinely concerned about highway safety and who are knowledgeable on the subject will oppose the short-sighted efforts of special interest groups to ban radar detectors.